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Natasha Becker, "Tschabalala Self," *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 2021.

BROOKLYN RAIL

ART | MARCH 2021 | IN CONVERSATION

Tschabalala Self with Natasha Becker

"This project has taught me many things, primarily that the most destructive attitude toward Blackness is consumption."



Portrait of Tschabalala Self, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

In November 2020, artist Tschabalala Self had her debut solo exhibition with Galerie Eva Presenhuber in New York. "Cotton Mouth," refers to elements of cultural and historical significance within the Black American lexicon. "People say they have cotton mouth when they smoke too much and their mouth ceases to function," says Self. According to the press release, "The choice of title is a burdened one, as a mouth that can no longer function serves as a metaphor for the systemic and continued silencing of Black America." Self's drawings, paintings, and audio piece thrust gestures, figures, and words into spaces where speech has been denied.

NEW YORK CITY
Eva Presenhuber
Cotton Mouth
November 7, 2020 –
January 23, 2021

BALTIMORE
Baltimore Museum Of Art
By My Self
March 28 – September
19, 2021

This body of work explores mythology, race, and personal space in Black American life. By re-examining historical and contemporary narratives, Self creates work that speaks on multiple levels to the experiences of being Black. Thus, the exhibition "is a continuation of the lore, which has kept Black people alive, in communion with their history, and alert to the possibilities of their future."

I sat down with Tschabalala Self on a sunny, winter afternoon to talk about the intersections of myth, cultural narratives, and identity in the show.

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Petzel

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Tschabalala Self, *Carpet*, 2020. Fabric, pigment, paper, acrylic and painted canvas on canvas. 2 parts, each: 84 x 72 inches. © Tschabalala Self. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. ?
Photo: Matt Grubb.

Natasha Becker (Rail): I'm really interested in how the audio piece came about because it encapsulates a lot of the ideas and the complexities of the show while adding another really powerful layer.

Tschabalala Self: I wanted to include audio because I'm trying to make my exhibitions more and more immersive. I'm thinking about how I can tap all the various senses of the viewer—the audio also allowed an opportunity for me to interject my own voice. I often find the gallery space very stoic—mimicking other institutional spaces meant for reflection, that is, a library or even a church to some degree. I wanted to confront that silence within the space with a sound. The audio piece is the soundscape that sets the tone for the entire exhibition. Looking at painting as an active engagement—whereas listening to a sound in the periphery is more passive. I find passive versus active interactions with subject matter affect the psyche in different ways. Transversely, as the maker, I was able to be more direct and less poetic in my messaging through the inherent didactic nature of the audio piece. I was able to make a manifesto in a way. So I was very excited about it, but the piece really came together very organically, I came to all those realizations about how the piece could be utilized as it developed. I was taking voice memo notes on my phone, to kind of flesh out ideas for the exhibition, and one of the voice memos, it just kept going, it really just became this stream of consciousness. I took all these different elements from various places and collaged them together, different audio clips that I had saved mostly on entirely different subjects by various Black thought and news outlets on YouTube.

Petzel

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Rail: I found it so powerful in a show that is not about illustrating a story about Black life, it's actually about producing that story and that takes us into mythology, which is one of the main themes, and is also into collage or a bricolage, bringing together fragments, because the Black experience has been fragmented, and it is precarious and it is violent, but there's this process of making and creating and aesthetics that also unfolds in that context.

Self: I have always been deeply interested in mythology, religious stories from all around the world and the tales of extraordinary people. Artists, like Andy Warhol, I believe share this interest in extraordinary people. I'm fascinated by him with regards to his interest in celebrity and American culture. I think his philosophies on the subject have become more and more true, maybe even more relevant now than at the time that he posed the ideas. "15 minutes of fame," look at that in the context of Instagram, YouTube, and reality TV. It was really forward thinking. But I think that there's a correlation to American culture's fascination with celebrity and the nation's youth as a country, the USA having only existed for 250 years or so. Maybe not having a unified or a deep-rooted spirituality, or a cultural core—because the nation is so young, individuals get elevated to the level of icons—celebrities become the idols, they are our "extra-ordinary people."

But then if you look at a group that's been marginalized within a fragile system, America itself already being a somewhat fragile system, I think this tendency is exaggerated. Celebrity culture takes up even more psychological space in the collective mind of Black America, because of Black America's history and positionality within this nation. To see an individual that looks like you be exalted and seemingly lifted above the muck of racism and disenfranchisement is a phenomenon. So if celebrity means a lot to the average American, Black celebrity means something entirely greater to the average Black American. With the audio piece I propose that a contemporary Black mythology can be understood through the allegories that have emerged from Black American pop culture. Pop cultural icons being Black celebrities. I was thinking too, about mythology being the way in which societies kind of pass on information from generation to generation, how they communicate. What is the rhetoric that allows Americans to move forward generation after generation? Within America you can reach your dreams, you can have the American dream, etcetera, etcetera. All that has only really been true for like one segment of the population. But even for that segment of the population, the American dream has seriously deteriorated over the last couple of generations. I was thinking about all of this while making the show but also trying to understand the importance of myth. So I suppose a myth, despite it being a falsehood, is not a lie, but rather a hyperbole.

Petzel

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Tschabalala Self, Nate the Snake, 2020. Digital print on canvas, fabric, thread, stamped canvas, painted canvas, dyed canvas, acrylic and hand mixed pigments on canvas, 84 x 60 x 1 1/2 inches. © Tschabalala Self. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: Matt Grubb.

Rail: I wonder if that's also why your characters, figures, and paintings are larger than life, because the myths are larger than life and the culture is larger than life. Is the vulnerability directly proportional to the size of that mythology, the greater the vulnerability, the greater that mythology and that myth making? Who becomes the icons and the heroes?

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Self: It's interesting what you said because looking transversely, the greater the potential for strength of an individual or community, the smaller the narrative around them becomes—perhaps it's like an attempt to flatten them. This happens often to the Black community, on a global level. Blackness is ancient—but Black life, Black contributions, and Black issues are often minimized.

Rail: I just love that, the work is so textured, and so layered and so rich, because that is also a metaphor, and a symbol of the textures and the richness, and the multidimensionality of Black bodies and Black lives and Black stories, can you elaborate a little bit on that?

Self: Yes, it took me a long time to find a formal language that was going to be compatible with the kind of work that I knew I wanted to make. Prior to making the works through assemblage and collage, I was working primarily in printmaking. I was making these handmade colographic plates. Colographic matrices are made out of different materials, and can be made out of any material that generates a texture. Mine were modular and figurative. But at some point I moved away from working primarily in printmaking and on paper because I wanted to have the opportunity and freedom to experiment with scale.



Left: Tschabalala Self, *Fast Girl*, 2020. Fabric, thread, charmeuse, silk, velvet, paper, pigment, acrylic, and painted canvas, 84 x 60 x 1 1/2 inches. Right: *Lil Mama 2*, 2020. Fabric, craft paper, tulle, dyed canvas, acrylic on canvas, 68 x 50 x 1 1/2 inches. © Tschabalala Self. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York.

Petzel

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I wanted to find a way back to painting. I knew I ultimately wanted to use canvas as my substrate. But there was something super charismatic and very interesting about the printmaking processes I had taken on. I tried to bridge the gap. In doing so, and in unpacking the work I had already done, I realized that I was putting most of my physical and psychological energy into the platemaking process. That platemaking process led me to making these appliqué elements that now exist in the paintings.

When I finally figured out this aesthetic language, it really clicked for me that it was the right direction. I had to transition from using these really built-up, thicker materials—heavily patinated cardboard and canvas scraps—to thinner, more malleable materials like textile and fabric. For a while, I was printing directly onto canvas to capture some of the texture—some of the texture of the plates themselves. Most of the earliest “fabrics” are actually printed on canvas, canvas that's been printed on using the printing press. It's been cathartic to literally build my subjects, and I am thankful that I found my way back to painting through this process. The formal qualities of the works truly express my ideas around multiplicity. One of my main goals was to have my figures emote on a structural level, which I believe they can because of their inherent physical qualities.

Rail: Have you been drawing all along as well?

Self: I have always done drawings, and drawings have become more and more important to my practice, each year becoming more significant. I feel like I have started to make a shift and that my drawings have gotten better. It's just a matter of confidence—the more I draw, the more ambitious my drawings become. I want to find my own style within drawing—I want to have a way of drawing that is my own. So someone could look at my drawing and they could see this kind of, you know, aesthetic charisma that was equivalent to what exists in the paintings—like they are part of the same *family*. This drawing series reminded me of my paintings and all of the formal qualities that I enjoy within those works. I actually named the series after it was done, collectively the series is called “Black Faces.” I think it's interesting how “Black Faces” versus “Black Face” carries different connotations.

Petzel

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Left: Tschabalala Self, *Black Face with Animated Face*, 2020. Right: *Black Face with Sweet Pink*, 2020. Colored pencil, acrylic paint, gouache, charcoal, graphite on archival inkjet print, 36 x 28 inches each. © Tschabalala Self. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: Matt Grubb.

Rail: I love the descriptions which match the figures, sweet or cute or joyful, and you see one person, one figure, in two different ways, and I love that too. There's a lot of humor and double meanings.

Self: The collective title speaks to a series of individuals and is definitely a double entendre. I wanted to unpack the loaded nature of the word "Black" through the literal use of the adjective to describe my subject's face. Yes, I am toying with the term "blackface" as it exists with American minstrel shows—but these works are not about minstrels, they are about Black figuration. I thought the drawings worked very well with the audio because I imagined the characters in the drawings, once they were all installed together, having a conversation with one another. The audio piece is very performative and I imagine the figures in the drawing exchanging the words spoken.

Rail: Your work in general, and in this show, is also about making space within culture for Black characters and Black stories and Black bodies. The body has always interested me because you create a space where the body can be in a multidimensional way, in a complex way.

Self: Multidimensionality is both a formal and conceptual concern in my work. If I am asked to speak on "Blackness" I want to have an accurate and honest conversation. Sanitized and policed conversations on Blackness often fall short in articulating the true multiplicity and complexity that

Petzel

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exists within the larger community. I haven't discussed my relationship to my American identity or framed Blackness as the primary identity politico in my work prior to this show. This project has taught me many things, primarily that the most destructive attitude toward Blackness is consumption.

Rail: Consumption can be violent too.

Self: Consumption is violent. The thing that scares me is that even gestures that appear to be positive can ultimately be violent. I think consumption is ultimately violent, because you're being absorbed. Sometimes consumption can appear to be positive but if you understand how culture can be abused and can be used as a tool against the masses—one can become suspicious of such things as art and entertainment.

Rail: It's a very subtle critique but yes, it certainly is there, because culture is the space that we operate in. We might feel a sense of freedom that there is a larger space within culture but that doesn't translate in reality or to other parts of society.

Self: That is true as well, I've been thinking about that a lot. I'm also thinking about, especially with the last presidency, the end of the American Empire—late phase capitalism—etcetera. All the controversies of the past couple years, the NFL and Kaepernick in particular, led me to think about the incident with [Latrell] Sprewell. I wanted to reconsider his outburst, so it became one of the main paintings in the show.

Petzel

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Tschabalala Self, *Sprewell*, 2020. Fabric, painted canvas, silk, jeans, painted newsprint, paper, stamp, thread, photo transfer and acrylic on canvas, 84 x 72 x 1 1/2 inches. © Tschabalala Self. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: Matt Grubb.

Rail: It speaks to the spaces within which Black people are highly visible, such as sport or entertainment or culture, but also, the consequences and responsibilities and burdens and problematics that come with that as well.

Self: Absolutely. In that painting, a man is wearing a Sprewell jersey while hugging and kissing his partner. The male protagonist in this work is a heroic and romantic figure in my mind. The jersey is meant to invoke a memory of and a conversation about Lateral Sprewell the individual. I conflated Sprewell's narrative with the narrative of Kanye West through the gesture of having the male

Petzel

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protagonist in the work wear Yeezy sneakers. I want to explore the idea of the "rogue negro"; the Black person that is acting opposite to how they're expected to act, going against their programming. It's fascinating that Sprewell and Kanye West, regardless of how you feel about them, or whether or not you identify with them, they both have made decisions contrary to what would be expected of them which caused a great deal of racialized controversy.

Rail: *Pocket Rocket* (2020) is a powerful picture. There's the background map and the colors (red and blue) that evoke the United States. The star and the gun, but the title, "Pocket Rocket" is playful and catchy. It's political, humorous, and layered in content.

Self: Yes. That painting was the last painting that I did for the show. It's very much inspired by Robert Colescott. I was looking at a lot of his work and I love Robert Colescott. He is an artist who has dealt with race in America the best; his way of interjecting humor to expose the absurdity of racial dynamics within America, and also his introduction of the erotic to articulate a Freudian anxiety around racial power dynamics is highly sophisticated and brave. I find his painting challenging and captivating. I think his work is funny and true and accurate and deep on so many levels—I love them all but I love his paintings with guns most of all. A gun is the object that probably best personifies America. I was inspired by those works when making *Pocket Rocket*. The term is a popular colloquialism that is used in rap songs as a way to refer to a gun—pistol, handgun. The gun signifies not only violence, but it can also mean power and domination. It is both an extension of one's hand and will. The term, from which the title is drawn, is glib and rather cynical. The costume of the protagonist in the work is inspired by Daisy Duke. I was going for a new-age "Black Americana" aesthetic. A gun means one thing in white America and another in Black America. And then it means a whole other thing in America in general. So there are at least three realities in this nation—and probably many, many more. The painting catches the moment of Ms. Black Duke pulling the trigger; it's dramatic, a cliffhanger of sorts.

Rail: Yes, I like the daring way that she looks at and confronts the viewer. Can you speak to the sculptures in your show?

Petzel

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Tschabalala Self, Loveseat prototype 2 (Brown Hips), 2020. Plaster cast and house paint, 36 x 38 x 18 inches. © Tschabalala Self. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: Matt Grubb.

Self: One of the other themes in the show is home and the domestic space. I wanted to locate the site in which all of the various topics and themes discussed in the show take hold. All of these ideas about rhetoric and cultural myth—how they affect our lives. I believe the home is the primary site of indoctrination. The home is the site of most of our initial experiences and the place where I believe we consume the most media. The home kind of appears and reappears in the paintings—the record player in the gallery's lower level is an homage to the home because it is a technology I associate

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solely with the domestic space. I wanted to create a sculptural object that also brought to mind the domestic. I landed on the idea of a couch or loveseat. But then again, the sculpture itself also mimics the lower half of a woman's body. Because the show is primarily about trying to place the origin of a Black American identity I was thinking a lot about birth and birth rights. In conflating the idea of origin and birth, I fixated on the womb. The sculptures, connote sex, pleasure, home, and origin.

Rail: The home and the domestic space thus also functions as a container for myth making. What has the past year been like for you?

Self: I'm thankful I was able to stay well and healthy. The year put a lot of things in perspective and showed me the things that are necessary—essential. I do not miss traveling as much as I thought I would. I have enjoyed being in the studio and my time alone. However, I hope things return to normal. Many people are suffering because of the current circumstances. I can't say I have come to any new conclusions about race in 2020 but I do think a lot of other people have—which can be positive. One of the most productive things I've seen in 2020 is a collective commitment to support Black businesses and fighting for Black economic power. I hope this continues.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2021/03/art/TSCHABALALA-SELF-with-Natasha-Becker/>